




The land I was born in  
was often called the village of myth.

The power I was granted at the shrine that fateful day  
was a  to the imminent.

And with it, I can once again protect everyone.

I want to protect everyone.

I want to recover quickly.

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# 第十六話

—狂花—

乃木若葉は  
勇者である

企画原案・シリーズ構成／

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One day in June, at 6 PM-- At Marugame Castle.

Crowds thronged at the courtyard in front of the inner citadel tower. Behind them were media crews with video cameras at the ready.

All eyes were filled with both hope and anxiety.

When the sky began to darken with the evening's madder red hue, a lone girl appeared at the entrance of the castle tower.

The girl was Nogi Wakaba.

With sword in hand and hero outfit on her body, the girl faced the people with the tower at her back.

The people stirred as they all began to notice her.

But Wakaba did nothing.

She simply stuck her sword into the soil and stood silently.

The stirring crowd eventually succumbed to the pressure of Wakaba's silence and sealed their lips.

The tension rose--

And once the tension had reached critical mass, Wakaba finally opened her lips.

"In about a month and a half, we will reach the fourth anniversary of the tragic 7/30 disaster."

The crowd watched Wakaba and listened to her words.

"Many things were stolen from us that day. Our lives, our land, and even our freedom to look up to the sky. That day, humanity's natural predator came soaring down from the sky, with strength beyond comprehension. But we would not go down without a fight. Weak we may be, but humanity possesses weapons unique to us: the weapons of wisdom and courage--"

Wakaba continued speaking, using the sheer intensity of her voice, without a megaphone.

She spoke of the cruel damage inflicted upon humanity by the monsters known as the Vertexes.

She spoke of the human endeavors to stand up against those monsters.

And finally, she spoke of the "Heroes", those who received the blessings of the land gods, strengthened by human wisdom, granting them the power to oppose the monsters.

Wakaba had been popular with the people of Shikoku, almost to the point of worship. The crowd listened so intently, they forgot to blink.

"--And now, the enemy has fortified its strength as well, forcing humanity into crisis once more. The heroes Doi Tamako and Iwojima Anzu have fallen in battle."

The truth of the heroes' deaths cast a shadow upon the faces of the audience.

But Wakaba continued all the louder.

"But we will still refuse to accept defeat! We can still reclaim what was stolen from us! And that is why we are working with the Taisha to form countermeasures. I am sure it won't be long before we find a way to turn this war on its head!"

Wakaba continued, raising her voice as loud as she could.

"Please remember! Remember the way humanity was meant to be! We trod upon the soil of Japan without fear of any natural predators! We spent our days with our friends, our family, and our lovers! Those are the days we've left behind! Those are the days we're meant to live! We're not meant to be livestock locked in a cage, waiting to be eaten by some monsters!"

With the castle tower and the evening sun at her back, the hero continued her entreaty.

All to give the people even the smallest sliver of hope.

"We the heroes have been fighting these natural predators, and we won't stop now! But do you think that makes us heroes anything special? Well I think not! No, I know for a fact-- That a parent would risk their lives to fight a predator if it meant protecting their children! I know for a fact-- That a friend would put themselves in danger if it meant saving a friend seeking refuge from outside of Shikoku! I know for a fact-- That if a patient suffering from Uranophobia Syndrome saw a child about to get hit by a car outside their front door, they would overcome their fear and rush to the rescue! I know-- that police officers and JSDF personnel volunteer themselves to exceedingly dangerous surveillance duty outside the barrier in the Seto Inland Sea! Each and every one of us has the courage to stand up against our natural predators! Each and every one of us is a hero! And as long as every one of us in Shikoku is a hero, we cannot, and will not lose to the monsters!!"

The sounds of applause and cheers rang out from within the crowd.

Wakaba unsheathed her sword and held it skyward.

"The courage to face our enemy!! The courage to save our friends!! The courage to accept our sadness!! The courage to remember our pain!! The courage to keep fighting!! I repeat, we are not livestock locked in a cage, waiting to be eaten by some monsters! Each and every one of us is a hero, working for a future where we can reclaim everything the invaders stole from us!!"

For just one moment, Wakaba's words paused. A look of intense rage and regret crossed her face.

"... And under no circumstances will I ever forgive those who stole my friends from me. I swear-- I'll make sure those monsters get their just reward."

Unlike the rest of her speech, these words seemed aimed more towards herself than towards her audience.

But the shift in Wakaba's expression and voice was only for a moment.

Her voice then regained its volume and once again spoke words to inspire the people--



The hero Nogi Wakaba's speech began in the evening and lasted for about half an hour.

After the speech, Wakaba returned to her dorm room and laid her head on Hinata's lap.

"Good job today. It must've been tough shouting the whole time, huh?"

"Yeah... But it was worthwhile if it made the people at least somewhat more optimistic. Still..."

Wakaba spoke ambiguously.

Today's speech was meant to raise the morale of the people after the news of the hero deaths and rising Vertex damage broke.

Wakaba wrote a rough draft for the speech, but the content was entirely rewritten by the Taisha.

The staging of the speech at Marugame Castle at evening was also a production decision mad by the Taisha. Furthermore, Wakaba's posture, hand gestures, as well as the timing of her pauses and her vocal emphasis were also practiced and trained in detail. Every small detail was apparently planned in order to maximize the speech's psychological effect on the populace.

The whole production seemed to be a success, as the audience appeared excited. Some people even cried.

But as for Wakaba, she could not shake the guilty feeling that she was deceiving everyone.

One line of the Taisha-revised speech had touched upon the topic of Suwa: "Before long, we may even join with Suwa's hero in a united front." However, Wakaba deliberately failed to speak about that topic.

Since the Taisha did not want to let the citizens know about the annihilation of Suwa, they probably wanted to use that line as a morale booster. But Wakaba couldn't find it in her to use Shiratori's name to deceive the people.

Furthermore-- Wakaba's aside about swearing revenge on the Vertexes was not scripted by the Taisha.

That was undeniably Wakaba's true intention.

"Wakaba-chan, your speech has been playing over and over on the news. It's going to be on the front page of tomorrow's newspapers too."

"Yeah..."

Hinata gently stroked Wakaba's sullen head.

Hinata was laden with complex feelings as well.

The only three remaining heroes were Wakaba, Yuuna, and Chikage. But Yuuna was too injured to participate in battle, and Chikage was under house arrest with her hero app and weapon confiscated, leaving her deprived of her hero power. So in effect, the only one capable of fulfilling hero duties was Wakaba.

The Taisha burdened Wakaba with the wills of the deceased and hospitalized heroes and were trying to use her as a symbol of hope. To do so, they used Wakaba's popularity throughout Shikoku and manipulated all information sent out to the media. All to keep the people of Shikoku out of despair.

"I wonder how Chikage's doing..."

After Wakaba muttered in concern, Hinata spoke up reassuringly.

"I'm sure she's fine..."

"Chikage's rampage was due to fairy influence. It's not like it's entirely her fault. At least that's what the Taisha have been saying..."

Wakaba had filed requests for Chikage's punishment to be light and to not drive her any further into the corner.

But Wakaba was not informed as to what extent the Taisha had heeded those requests.

Hinata was not informed of the Taisha's decision either.

(Perhaps the Taisha doesn't have much trust in me either... Maybe because I've been to close with the heroes and all...)

Anything the Taisha told Hinata would inevitably reach the heroes as well. Thus, there were many things the Taisha would not tell her.

The Koori family was granted a house in Marugame where Chikage lived with her mother and father.

Her mother was currently in Stage 3 of Uranophobia, and thus was unable to live daily life without medication. She slept half of the day with sleep medication in order to maintain mental tranquility and was nursed by Chikage, her father, and agents sent from the Taisha.

It was nothing short of agony for Chikage to watch her mentally unstable mother and her stressed out father trying to take care of her.

So she locked herself up in her room as much as she could, only leaving when absolutely necessary. She was in her room today as well, watching TV blankly sprawled out on top of her bed. Every now and then, she would hear her mother screaming from outside her room, and her dad and a caregiver try to calm her down.

The TV news was broadcasting Wakaba giving her speech from Marugame Castle.

Chikage was made painfully aware of her own misery. Smartphone footage of Chikage's rampage at her hometown had been uploaded to the internet. In the video, Wakaba looked like a true symbol of bravery and justice by protecting the townspeople and trying to stop Chikage. Furthermore, Wakaba's encouraging speech as a representative of the heroes and of the Taisha had been playing over and over on the news these past few days, even making the newspapers. She was now almost deified by the people of Shikoku.



Many people were still critical of the heroes and the Taisha, but they were almost completely drowned out by those praising Wakaba. Wakaba had become the charismatic leader of the cornered humanity.

She was loved and adored as a figure of hope.

(And compared to her... I'm just...)

Power-stripped and empty-handed. The berserk hero hated by humanity. Under house arrest and allowed no visitors.

She had lost her worth, her fame, and her friends.

"Ugh..."

How did things turn out like this?

Where did she go wrong?

"Gh... uugh...!"

Tears warped her vision.

"Takashima-san... Takashima-san... Takashima-san..."

She wanted someone to understand her feelings.

she wanted to talk with someone who could provide mental support.

Chikage left her room on unsteady feet.

To the Taisha-affiliated hospital where -she- was hospitalized--

That was the plan.

Since Yuuna was no longer banned from having visitors, Chikage thought she'd be able to see her.

After leaving her house, Chikage avoided public notice by walking down paths with zero foot traffic.

She was, after all, under house arrest, so she wasn't supposed to be allowed outside. Besides, her rampage incident made people fear her, so it would cause an uproar if someone saw her.

She had to walk stealthily in the shadows where nobody could see her.

(How... sad...)

She would likely never regain the respect and love that came with being a hero ever again.

In that case, just what exactly was she living for?

Even if she died, there probably wouldn't be anybody to mourn her death, just like what happened with Anzu and Tamako.

If she entered the hospital through the front entrance, the receptionist would spot her, so Chikage entered through the back entrance. She walked cautiously so that the hospital staff wouldn't find her.

She already knew where Yuuna's room was. Once she somehow managed to get there without anyone spotting her, she knocked on the door.

But there was no answer.

She quietly opened the door, but there was nobody inside.

(Is she... out...?)

That couldn't be. Yuuna couldn't have recovered enough to go outside the hospital. At most, she could perhaps walk through the garden. She'd be back before long, so Chikage thought she could just wait in the room for her to get back-- but as soon as that thought crossed her mind, she heard a familiar coming from down the hallway.

"Ahahah... But... awrighty, I'll do my best!"

It was Yuuna.

Just hearing that voice was enough to clear up some of Chikage's gloomy mood.

Yuuna's voice came from the "physical practice room"-- the room for physical rehabilitation. Chikage went to the physical practice room door and peeked in.

"Takashima-sa-- ah...."

But Chikage swallowed her words halfway.

Yuuna wasn't alone in the room; Wakaba was with her. Yuuna was squeezing a hand-sized ball over and over, perhaps for arm rehabilitation. Wakaba was beside her, apparently counting how her reps.

Without thinking, Chikage hid behind the corner of the door.

(Wait... why am I hiding...?)

She could've easily just gone and talked to them.

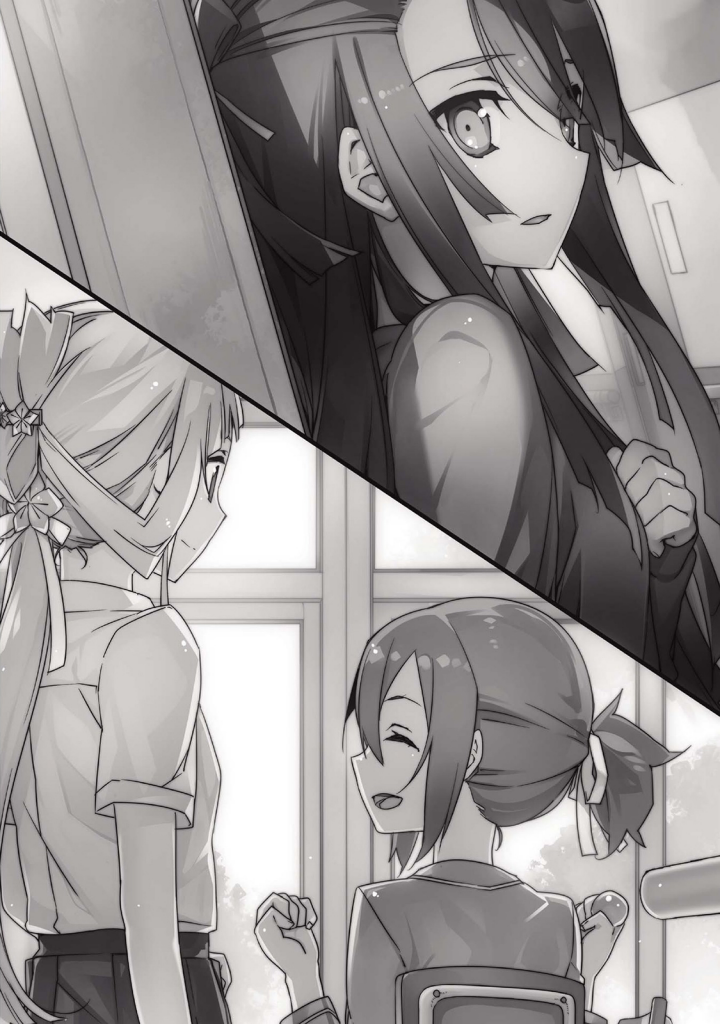
But for some reason, she hesitated.

She kept peeking at Yuuna and Wakaba from behind the door.

She couldn't hear what they were saying clearly. Just bits and pieces.

"But... couldn't help it. So..."

"Come on, Wakaba-chan... Yeah, me too... I'm sure if we all... you know!"



Wakaba crossed her arms in thought and started talking about something with a stumped look on her face. Yuuna continued her arm rehab while smiling at Wakaba's words and nodding encouragingly. It appeared Wakaba was consulting Yuuna about something and Yuuna was providing answers.

As she watched the exchange-- Chikage felt all too deeply torn.

Yuuna and Wakaba were fellow heroes, strong, brave, and charming, both of equal standing.

(But... I'm nothing like that...)

She was gloomy, weak, and not even a hero now.

(I... don't belong with them...)

At that moment, perhaps noticing a presence at the door, Wakaba turned around and saw Chikage.

"Ah... Chikage!"

"Gun-chan!?"

Yuuna noticed Chikage too and tried to get up from her chair. But perhaps since her body wasn't in perfect condition, she lost her balance.

"Watch ou--"

Chikage reflexively rushed up to Yuuna, but Wakaba caught Yuuna since she was next to her.

"You okay, Yuuna?"

"Yeah, thanks, Wakaba-chan."

Upon seeing that happen,

Chikage turned around and made a mad dash as if to escape from something.

"Chikage! Where are you going!?"

Wakaba called out to Chikage, but she ran off without stopping.

"What do you think is up with Gun-chan...?"

A puzzled look spread across Yuuna's face.

"Hmm... Well, there's something I want to talk about with Chikage too..."

Wakaba was worried about Chikage too since the house arrest meant she couldn't see her. She had no idea why Chikage had come to the hospital, but Wakaba wanted to make sure she was okay.

"Aww, and we were just talking about how we were all going to go to the Taisha and tell them it wasn't Gun-chan's fault..."



"Yeah..."

That was the reason Wakaba had gone to see Yuuna today. To talk about the plan for Yuuna, Hinata, and Wakaba to try petitioning the Taisha one more time to lighten Chikage's punishment.

Chikage ran away from the rehab room. She had completely forgotten that she needed to remain hidden.

Wakaba and Yuuna looked like they were enjoying a fun conversation.

Wakaba caught Yuuna when she lost her balance.

(There's no room for me... in their world...!)

Chikage had lost everything as a hero. The power, the praise, and the respect. The last thing she had left was a place she belonged. But Wakaba had stolen that from her as well.

Hatred began to shroud Chikage's mind.

"You're... Koori-san!?"

A nurse had noticed her walking in the hall.

"What are you doing here!?" "Koori-san, wait right there!" "Somebody come help!"

Hospital staff members gathered one after the other, trying to catch Chikage. Chikage pushed a security guard and tried to escape, but without her scythe or transformation app, Chikage was only as strong as an ordinary girl. She was caught all too easily.

A crowd surrounded her and held her down--

Just like a scene from a criminal justice TV show.

(Why... why does it have... to be this way...!?)

Taisha personnel forcibly took Chikage back to her home.

Her father looked like he wanted to say something, but Chikage was in no mood to talk. She simply locked herself in her room.

"Uwaaaaaaahhhhhhh!!"

She fell to her knees on the floor and wrung her lungs out in a cry.

Afterwards, Chikage got up on unsteady feet and destroyed everything in her room. She threw her game consoles and handheld systems at the wall until they shattered. She tore up her bed and cushions with a box cutter. She flipped her bookshelf and trampled on the scattered books until they became a crumpled mess. She swung her chair at the table and smashed her laptop into her TV.

"Haah, haah, haah, haah...!!!"

Chikage stood still inside her wreck of a room.

"... I've lost... everything... Everything... was stolen from me..."

And now there was someone who had everything Chikage had lost.

"I'll take it back... I'll take everything back... I swear..."

Chikage took out her smartphone and began typing out a message to the Taisha:

"I've had plenty of time to rest, and as you can see, I've calmed down now. I've reflected deeply and now regret the incident I caused the other day--"

The next day--

Once again, only Wakaba and Hinata showed up at school in Marugame Castle.

Classes continued as usual, even with only the two of them.

During lunch break, Wakaba and Hinata talked as they ate udon in the dining room.

"Chikage-san... still hasn't been released from house arrest, huh?"

"They should at last let her come to school. She'd feel a lot better here than just staying secluded at home all day...."

"I'm worried. This isn't the best time for--"

As if to interrupt Hinata, an alarm rang from Wakaba's smartphone.

Wakaba looked up to see Hinata had frozen in place. No, it wasn't just inata. Not even the hands on the clock were moving.

"Forestization...!?"

Wakaba activated her transformation app and flew out of the dining room as her clothes changed into her hero outfit.

As she got outside, the sight of Shikoku coated in vegetation came into view. From far in the distance, she could see a white horde of Vertexes approaching.

Now, Wakaba was the only hero able to fight. Could she win against the monsters all alone?

(But failure is not an option...)

If Wakaba lost here, nobody else could stand up against the Vertexes--

At that moment, a lone girl landed right next to her.

"I'm... here too..."



It was a black-haired girl in a red-themed hero outfit, carrying a large scythe like a grim reaper-- Koori Chikage.

Apparently Chikage's house arrest had been rescinded, and her scythe and transformation app had been returned. The Taisha had fast-tracked Chikage's reinstatement due to the danger of having Wakaba fight alone.

"Sorry for all the trouble I caused... I'm okay now..."

"I see... That's good."

Wakaba smiled in relief.

And thus, the two of them focused their sights on the horde of Vertexes approaching from the Seto Inland Sea.

Wakaba had thought it'd be difficult to fight them all alone. But now that she had an ally, the story was different. Since Yuuna had been hospitalized, Wakaba and Chikage had been defending Shikoku as a pair in the meanwhile.

"I'm going on ahead!"

Wakaba kicked off the ground and launched herself towards the white monsters. She drew her sword and cut down enemy after enemy.

The Vertexes' numbers weren't particularly greater than usual, but by no means could they let their guard down. The Vertexes had the power to corrode the Jukai. And corrosion to the Jukai resulted in harm to the people of Shikoku.

Short, decisive battles were key.

(Should I use a trump card...?)

Wakaba hesitated for a second, but decided she could manage with her usual strength for now. Now that they knew the effects of fairy power were more than just physical, the risk of using them was too great even if they did help make short, decisive battles.

Wakaba defeated the Vertexes one after another. Chikage mauled down enemies with her scythe as well.

Victory was within sight.

(Alright, let's keep up the pace--)

Just then, something black caught Wakaba's eye.

"!?"

Long before she could identify what it was, Wakaba dodged it instinctively. Had she been one moment too late, she would've been fatally wounded.

The black object was Chikage's scythe.

Chikage had swung her scythe's blade at Wakaba.

"Of course you would... Totally thought I had it, though..."

"!? Chikage, what's the meaning of this!?"

"Tell me, Nogi-san... It's absurd, don't you think...? Everyone loves you... but they all... shun me... they hate me..."

Chikage began muttering as if in soliloquy.

"Chikage... What's wrong? Get a hold of yourself!"

Wakaba kept cutting down the oncoming Vertexes as she called out to Chikage.

"Why... did things turn out this way...? I know..."

Chikage shut her eyes and began speaking with cold, machine-like monotony.

"It's all because of you."

She continued speaking with her eyes shut.

"If there were only one hero... If only I were around... and you were gone... then the people would have no choice but to count on me... I'd have a place by Takashima-san's side... Everyone's praise for you... their love for you... would all be for me... I'll stand in the place you stand now...!"

Chikage's hero outfit transformed.

And the next moment, seven Chikages appeared, surrounding Wakaba.

"You used fairy power!?"

Wakaba raised her voice.

One of the seven Chikages slashed her scythe at Wakaba.

"!!!"

Wakaba parried the first Chikage's attack with her sword. Immediately afterwards, two Chikage's swung their scythes from the sides simultaneously. Wakaba blocked the right one with her sword and dodged the left one with a twist of her body. But she was unable to dodge as a fourth Chikage slashed Wakaba's back.

"Ghhh...!"

Wakaba's face warped in pain.



The sight gave Chikage a dark joy.

Just like the time she rampaged in her hometown, her mind was soaked in hatred and she could feel it crumble. 'Erase Nogi Wakaba and you'll be a loved and respected hero.' -- said another Chikage inside her head.

The fairy's influence was eating away at Chikage's mind all the more.

"Ohohagari' (大葉刈, the Great Leaf Reaper)... The spiritual power imbued within this scythe fits me perfectly now...!"

The Ohohagari-- the unpleasant blade was used by a land god to cut down his friend's mourning hut.

And thus, it was a suitable weapon to kill an ally.

The seven Chikages kept swinging their scythes at Wakaba.

"Ghhh!"

Wakaba leapt away, trying to escape the seige of Chikages.

But the Chikages remained hot on Wakaba's pursuit.

Even as Wakaba fled, the Vertexes continued to attack her. As Wakaba dealt with the Vertexes, the Chikages caught up to her and surrounded her again.

"I... will take... your place...!"

Chikage relentlessly swung her scythes.

No matter how proficient Wakaba was in martial arts, there was nothing she could do to perfectly dodge all of the seven Chikages' simultaneous attacks.

The longer Wakaba desperately warded off attacks, the more her body got wounded.

"You... if it weren't for you...!! I was loved...!!!"

Chikage's sorrowful cries echoed.

With each scythe swing she took, Wakaba felt Chikage's anguish and sorrow.

(What... should I have done...?)

Every memory she spent with Chikage ran through Wakaba's brain.

When they first met, there had perhaps been some discord between them. But lately, they had worked it out and connected their hearts as friends, or so she had thought.

And yet-- now Wakaba was nothing more to Chikage than a target of her hatred and killing intent.

(Why... did things have to be this way...!?)

There must have been some way to have gotten along better with Chikage.

There must have been some way to have been friends with her.

Was there something she did wrong?

Or was this fate-- an unfortunate future fated from the beginning?

(Why...)

As she sustained Chikage's attacks, Wakaba began cranking out thoughts.

But she could not find an answer. There was no answer to be found.

"Checkmate...!"

Slowed down by her self-doubt, Wakaba found herself flanked by three Chikages swinging their scythes from the left, right, and top.

Without any gas in timing or angle for Wakaba to dodge, the fatal flurry of scythe swings came down upon her.

"Huh...!?"

But what happened the next instant was not Wakaba's death, but an anomaly that astonished even Chikage.

The three Chikages that swung their scythes at Wakaba vanished-- or rather, a total of six of the seven Chikages vanished. Scattered like flower petals in an instant.

(My... fairy...!?)

Chikage could not understand what had happened.

Wakaba didn't seem to understand the situation either, as she had a perplexed look on her face.

(... Doesn't matter! I don't need fairy power...!)

Chikage continued to swing her scythe out of hatred. But immediately, her hero outfit itself disappeared, leaving Chikage standing in the Jukai in her school uniform.

"Wh-what...!?"

Chikage was confused as to what was happening to her own body.

She couldn't easily swing her scythe as she usually could. It felt like a heavy lump of metal, which she dropped, because she could not even hold it up.



(My hero power... disappeared....!?)

"Chikage!? What happened!?"

Chikage couldn't answer Wakaba's question, as not even she knew what was going on with her own body.

Chikage took out her smartphone and in a panic, she tried to activate the transformation app over and over, but she could not transform.

"Why won't... it work...!? I can't transform... I can't become a hero...!!"

For some unknown reason, Chikage had completely lost all power as a hero.

The Vertexes swarmed Chikage. A lone, now defenseless girl would be nothing but easy food for the monsters--

--normally, that is.

"Haah!"

Wakaba swung her sword, cutting down all the monsters swarming towards Chikage.

Wakaba shielded her.

"Chikage, don't you dare leave my side!"

"Huh...?"

As Chikage looked in confusion, Wakaba kept fighting while protecting her. Wakaba slew the countless Vertexes without leaving Chikage's side for a moment.

Fighting the Vertexes without moving from the same spot was far more difficult than fighting them in motion. Mobility was one of the most powerful weapons that separated the heroes from the Vertexes.

Without it, the heroes were susceptible to concentrated attacks from all sides.

Without her hero powers, Chikage had pretty much lost all of her mobility. If Wakaba were to move around, Chikage would be unable to keep up. Thus, Wakaba had no choice but to fight in place at Chikage's side.

"Why..? Why... are you... protecting me...?"

Chikage could not understand. She had attacked Wakaba with the intent to kill.

"Why? Isn't it obvious? Because we're friends!"

"Huh...?"

"Because we're friends!! No matter what you do, you're my friend!! So I'll protect you!! No matter what!!"

"Nogi... san..."

In order to withstand the tempest of Vertex attacks, Wakaba activated a trump card, imbuing her body with Yoshitsune's power to fight.

But even so, the battle conditions were overwhelmingly unfavorable.

Some of the Vertexes became an evolved form, firing countless arrows at Wakaba from a distance. She deflected the arrows with her sword, but each arrow deflected meant another attack she could not perform.

"Raaahhhh!"

Wakaba grabbed an arrow out of the air with her bare hand. The friction of the arrow split the skin on her palm, causing her to bleed. But nevertheless, she hurled the arrow back. Wakaba's repurposed arrow pierced the evolved Vertex's body.

"Haah... haaah...!"

Wakaba's breathing grew rough. In addition to the exhaustion from using a trump card, she was under concentrated enemy fire, giving her not a moment's rest. She was building fatigue at an alarming rate.

But nevertheless, Wakaba protected Chikage.

In Chikage's eyes, Wakaba was a true hero of legend.

As she watched Wakaba's never-ending fight, Chikage thought to herself--

(Why... couldn't I be like that...)

Was it because the influence of fairy power brought her to mental instability?

No, Wakaba had been using fairy power just as much as Chikage had.

Was it due to her unfortunate background? No, everyone who had lived through the day the Vertexes first invaded had an unfortunate background. Including Wakaba.

(In the end... I... was just weak...)

The only problem was in Chikage's mind.

(But in that case--)

If the problem was only in her mind--

(Then I too... can be like Nogi-san...!)

Wakaba's concentration paused for a moment out of exhaustion, leaving her open. A Vertex took the opportunity to snap at her.



"Nogi-san!"

Chikage pushed Wakaba, saving her from the enemy's attack.

--but not without a great cost.

In Wakaba's place, Chikage became Vertex food.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

As the monster bit into her, Chikage let out an intense, painful cry.

"Chikage!!"

Wakaba cut down that Vertex posthaste, but from Chikage's body was tattered from her shoulder down her side. Her flesh was gouged, her bones fractured and exposed. Her internal organs were likely done for as well.

(Ahh... crap... This wound is... but... it doesn't... hurt... anymore...)

Chikage's consciousness faded into the distance.

In her blurred vision, she saw Wakaba roaring as she fought.

Even now, Wakaba still stayed in place, protecting Chikage.

(... It's... okay now... I'm... beyond... help... So there's... no need... to protect me anymore... I'm sorry... Nogi-san... I'm sorry... for everything... I've done...)

And then Chikage's consciousness cut out.

By the time she regained consciousness, the surrounding Jukai disappeared, leaving Chikage on the ground in Marugame Castle's inner citadel.

The sun had began to set, leaving the area seeped in the color of the evening.

Not one Vertex remained.

And standing before Chikage's eyes was a heavily wounded Wakaba.

(Amazing... she really... did it...)

Wakaba had annihilated every last Vertex.

All while protecting Chikage, without moving a single step.

"Chikage, we need to get you to the hospital...!"

Wakaba held Chikage with both hands. But Chikage could not even feel them. Her entire body had already gone numb.

The fact that she couldn't even feel the warmth of Wakaba's hands... was a little sad.

"... It's... no use... It's something of a miracle... that I'm even alive right now..."

"Don't say that!"

The tone of Wakaba's shout alone made it clear that Chikage's wounds were beyond medical help. As she lay in Wakaba's arms, Chikage could see the evening town and sea spreading out from beneath Marugame Castle.

Chikage knew that every day, Wakaba would come to this inner citadel to gaze upon the Seto Inland Sea.

"... Let me... rest like this... just a while longer... It'll be hard... to carry me..."

"Then I'll call for a medical team here!"

Wakaba took out her smartphone as her body trembled in sorrow.

(I thought... that if I died... nobody would mourn me...)

Chikage wanted to be loved.

She thought that if she strove as a hero, she would prove her worth and be loved by others.

So she fought, and fought...

When unbeatable Vertexes appeared-- when she lost her hero power-- when people stopped loving her-- she had thought she had lost everything.

But in truth, she didn't.

The days they spent in Marugame castle together--

The udon they ate together. The Vertexes they fought together. The hot-spring trip they spent together. The games they played together. The leisurely hours they spent together.

Regardless of her hero power, or her Vertex fights, Chikage's friends had loved her as a friend.

(... I'm such... an idiot...)

If only she had made that realization--

Chikage would probably have been satisfied.

She would have been satisfied just being loved by her friends.

"... Tell Takashima-san... thanks... for everything..."



The truth was Chikage wanted to see her once more. But-- she thought she no longer had the time, nor the qualification to do so.

"Chikage...!"

The teardrops spilling from Wakaba's eyes fell onto her smartphone.

And then-- With the last of her strength, Chikage told her.

She told Wakaba the one thing she never could before.

"... Nogi-san.. I... hate you..."

"I know..."

"But... I adore you... just as much..."

"..."

"I loved... you..."

Wakaba said nothing and simply held Chikage's body in a tight embrace.

I'm glad that in the end, I got to see the same sight in the same place as you--

But those words never left her lips.

Chikage smiled and closed her eyes as if to sleep.

(Chapter 16 END)